

Playtime Over

Get back to serious music

Our preview (4/22) of the Eugene Symphony's *Play! A Video Game Symphony* has provoked a thoughtful reply from the orchestra's president, Paul Winberg (5/6). Eugene readers deserve to hear about the issues we've raised because they're vital for keeping classical music alive.



As Winberg notes, the ESO, which like every orchestra faces the challenge of attracting new audiences while not losing the old ones, plays more new music than most orchestras its size. Yet it still devotes only a fraction of its annual programming to contemporary music, and one of those precious slots has been turned over to video game music. Normally, I'm the first to applaud when an orchestra departs from the endless repetition of 19th century warhorses. But a novelty such as *Play!* can't replace something far more important to music culture – programming the work of today's orchestral composers.

I'm certainly happy that many listeners – some of them probably first-time visitors to the symphony – undoubtedly enjoyed the music they heard at the event. But the studies I've seen suggest that these kinds of modern pops programs do not build a sustainable audience for classical or postclassical music programming – new listeners seldom return for the regular fare. Why choose gussied-up video game themes to fill one of the rare slots devoted to non-stodgy repertoire when there's plenty of eminently listenable music written by dozens of fine contemporary composers – some of them right here in Oregon – that could speak to today's listeners and build a sustainable audience for contemporary sounds?

Paying for one of these pre-packaged national programs instead of performing (better yet, commissioning) a piece by a Northwest composer is the musical equivalent of buying Twinkies at a big box chain store instead of locally gathered honey at the farmer's market. The latter is an investment in homegrown musical culture.

If orchestras are going to survive, they need to be growing tomorrow's audience by connecting listeners to the best serious orchestral music that's being created today. Instead of giving the city a choice between one-time gimmicks and museum programming, why doesn't every Eugene Symphony concert (and those of other classical organizations) feature at least one work by actual living, breathing creative artists, as orchestras did in Beethoven's day, and as other arts institutions (dance companies, theaters, etc.) and visionary symphony music directors, such as the ESO's own conductor laureate Marin Alsop, are doing all the time? (Alsop has also presented *Play!* to her Baltimore audiences, but in the context of a much broader look at contemporary composers.) That would certainly attract listeners who seek more than the comfort of the familiar in the arts – and mention national attention for boldness.

Certainly programming isn't the only thing – maybe not even the main thing – that needs to change. Venues, nontraditional audience outreach, presentation modes (e.g. multimedia), contextualizing (via lecture demos, art exhibits, etc.), partnerships with other arts and community institutions, flexibility of ensemble size and makeup, financial arrangements and maybe most of all ticket prices – they all have to be in the mix too. But success depends on creating a product that new audiences want to hear, and more than once.

As Winberg notes, the ESO has, commendably, embarked on some of those promising other ways to reach new audiences, such as community partnerships. That makes Eugene's orchestra an ideal institution to educate current and potential listeners, and make the case for serious contemporary orchestral music. In the long run, it's in the orchestra's own interest, as well as the community's, to bring audiences the serious music of our own time and place.

Brett Campbell writes for EW and other regional and national publications. He currently lives in Portland, but still spends time in Eugene.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PROVINCIAL SYMPHONY

Concerning Brett Campbell's well-taken criticism of the Eugene Symphony's stodgy programming (*EW* 4/22) and ESO Executive Director Paul Winberg's needlessly personal response to Campbell (*EW* 5/6): Winberg claims the symphony takes programming seriously, but next year's schedule presents the music of only one living composer. Not saying that all the dead guys who will be performed weren't wonderful composers. Just saying that they're all dead.

It's not the job of a professional music critic to be a sock puppet. And Winberg's implied message that Campbell and *EW* should not criticize his symphony was heavy-handed and provincial.

*Tom Manoff
Classical Music Critic
National Public Radio's
All Things Considered*

IGNORANT CRITICISM

I just want to publicly thank Paul Winberg for his excellent "Viewpoint" response to Brett Campbell's ignorant article about the Eugene Symphony (*Music*: 4.22.10). Whatever Campbell's actual knowledge of the Eugene Symphony Orchestra may be, it was truly disheartening to see him use the programming of *Play! A Video Game Symphony* as a platform to randomly deride the classical music industry as a whole.

As a 20+ year veteran of the industry, I can say with authority and experience that some of the issues Campbell describes do exist, to some extent, in some organizations; however, in the many orchestras I've worked with, the Eugene Symphony Orchestra stands out as an organization that is well managed, mindfully supported by an active board, and consistently appreciated by enthusiastic and diverse audiences. The problems Campbell so blithely associates with the ESO are not germane to this organization.

*Lydia Van Dreele
Assistant Professor of Horn
University of Oregon School of Music
and Dance*

MATTER OF POLICY

Around and around it goes. And outward, too, if Eugene, like Springfield, buys into the mythology that it needs to accommodate growth by expanding its urban growth boundary. But in fact growth cannot be accommodated, and it is not inevitable. It is a matter of policy, a matter of choice.

Species grow within certain physical constraints. Growth beyond those limits sickens both the organism and its milieu. Intellectual development, however, is limited only by one's education, experience and imagination. It's past time that we use some of it to recognize that the unlimited use of limited resources by unlimited populations is a perilous path to a dead end.

Some believe that growth can be smart. But "smart growth" is an oxymoron, an elaborate shell game forcing a Sophie's Choice: Do we increase density and destroy the architectural integrity and quality of life in historical neighborhoods, for example, or do we urbanize and suburbanize farm and forest land and natural areas? Failure to recognize limits to growth feeds the same old paradigm that has made poisoned air, water and land a worldwide crisis — even as we continue to produce more of us to administer the doses.

Until we get off the growth machine and expand our minds rather than our beltways, we'll continue to chase our tails, digging a deeper hole in the pursuit.

*Robert Emmons
Fall Creek*

EXTENSION'S VALUE

I urge a yes vote on Measure 20-158 to support OSU's Extension Service here in Lane County. The Extension Service has been labeled by some people as a "hobby enterprise." This is not the case. Their services include teaching skills essential to our local food safety and food security.

The Willamette Valley is a prime agricultural region. As recently as 40 years ago, local growers produced close to 50 percent of the food consumed by Lane County citizens. Currently less than

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